

Ceremonial Cloth: The Representation of Textiles in Etruscan Funerary Imagery

Richly colored and elaborately composed textiles dominate many familiar visual representations from a wide array of Etruscan funerary contexts, including painted tombs, cinerary urns and sculpted sarcophagi. These ubiquitous images suggest that, as in many ancient and modern societies, textiles surely played a significant role as cultural communicators of status, gender, age and other aspects of Etruscan social identity. Frustratingly, however, the archaeological record is largely silent on the ancient context of such textiles, as they are rarely preserved. For this reason, previous studies of Etruscan textiles have generally focused either on the representation of types of dress (Bonfante 2003) or the process of production through careful examination of ceramic textile tools (Gleba 2008). While these avenues of research have provided a great deal of insight into the diversity of Etruscan garments and the highly specialized skills of spinning and weaving necessary for their production, less attention has been directed towards the function and significance of ancient Etruscan textiles that were not worn or utilized as adornment. In fact, a close look at Etruscan funerary imagery reveals numerous examples of textiles used as coverings and blankets, wall hangings and even offerings. In this paper, I focus on several scenes where represented textiles are not part of a costume or attire, but rather textiles themselves seem to be primary actors in the performance of social ritual or ceremony.

Two types of evidence are particularly illustrative. The first is a group of funerary *cippi* from Chiusi dating to the mid to late Archaic period. Most of these four-sided monuments are decorated in relief on each side depicting a wide range of common Etruscan elite imagery, such as banqueting, processions and games. Several scene types feature textiles in ceremonial contexts, such as group of approximately ten reliefs where assemblages of seated and standing women and sometimes men exchange or drape long pieces of cloth amongst each other, or a

unique relief of a procession where the final three figures are portrayed frontally with a bordered textile covering them from above. While there is debate about the interpretation of these scenes (Jannot 2004), a plausible suggestion is that they may depict varying components of a marriage ceremony (Haynes 2000, 245; van der Meer 2011, 14-17) in which textiles play an important part.

A second type of textile representation in funerary contexts is exemplified by the famous pair of fourth century B. C. E. *Tetnies* sarcophagi at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The sculpted lids of these two sarcophagi each depict an embracing couple lying beneath a textile. As in comparative scenes of Etruscan prothesis where the deceased's body is covered, the textiles on the Boston sarcophagi are broad and encompass a significant portion of the couples' bodies. Here again cloth serves as a visual unifier of not only the sculptural composition but also the couples themselves, evoking perhaps the role of textiles in multiple ceremonies marking both marriage and death.

In these examples and others, cloth and textile are fully integrated into Etruscan funerary imagery—they are not secondary accouterments but provide a primary focus for the visual narrative. Careful juxtaposition of the portrayal of covered and uncovered figures emphasizes the textile itself as part of a ritual action concerned with the metaphor of enclosure and unity. In Etruscan society, where lineage is a key factor in social dominance and representations of the male/female couple are frequent, representations of textiles in funerary imagery may contribute to a wider social dialogue of gendered power and social status.

Bibliography

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